

Feedback: “Think or Die!”

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 0196-0644/2000/\$12.00 + 0
 47/1/109943
 doi:10.1067/mem.2000.109943

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[Green WL. Feedback: “think or die!” *Ann Emerg Med.* September 2000;36:253-254.]

To the Editor:

I thoroughly enjoyed the evidence-based emergency medicine update and comment by Wyer¹ and Cordell² concerning the use of recombinant tissue plasminogen activator (rt-PA) in acute ischemic stroke. The authors performed an excellent critical analysis of a difficult topic. Severe reservations concerning the use of thrombolytic agents in patients, related to the risk of intracranial hemorrhage, were noted. However, many physicians, imagining which therapy they would choose should they ever have a stroke, may argue the value ethic “walk or die” in selecting rt-PA. The “walk or die” argument ignores the fact that disabled patients may nevertheless have a good quality of life, preferable to other treatment outcomes. The flaw of the “walk or die” argument becomes quite evident when considering the trauma victim who must undergo amputation. Few if any patients (or physicians, for that matter) would choose death over the loss of a limb, despite the resulting disability.

Disability is very commonly an acceptable outcome, chosen over a small chance of return to normal function that carries catastrophic risk. Patients therefore may prefer to forgo thrombolytic therapy where the chance of return to normal function is modest and the occurrence of intracranial hemorrhage catastrophic.

The discrepancy of treatment choices by physicians, when treating patients versus treating ourselves, may be caused by our delusions of grandeur. We may have convinced ourselves that we are the saviors from disease, when in fact we are only servants trying to help our patients escape disability and death. This reality becomes clear when we treat ourselves and make decisions affect-

ing our own families. We can only provide palliative therapy for many diseases and not cures.

An evaluation of hemiplegic patients found that greater than 50% were self-sufficient.⁴ There is also a close correlation after stroke of social stress with the inability to understand language, not the ability to ambulate.⁵ Therefore, a better argument may be “cognate or die,” assuming that social stress and disability are worse than life itself.

Walter L. Green, MD

1. Wyer PC. Feedback: walk or die! (in response). *Ann Emerg Med.* 1999;34:661-662.
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In response:

[Wyer PC. Feedback: “think or die” [response]. *Ann Emerg Med.* September 2000;36:254.]

Dr. Green’s comments highlight important limitations of the outcome measurements used in the published randomized controlled trials of thrombolysis in stroke. He points out that the choice between “walk or die” as an outcome of ischemic stroke may overlook the very thing that many patients would consider to be the principal measure of recovery: the level of cognitive function and mental life in the stroke survivor. Another potential outcome measure not addressed by the “walk or die” formula—quality of life assessment—may, in some cases, be more related to cognitive function than to the ability to conduct activities of daily living without assistance.

The trials of rt-PA for patients with acute ischemic stroke that were considered in the discussion at issue in Dr. Green’s letter used neurologic deficit scores, including the National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale (NIHSS) and the Scandinavian Stroke Scale, as well as functional outcome scores including the Barthel Index, the modified Rankin Score, and the Glasgow Outcome Score.¹⁻³ Although the NIHSS includes measures of aphasia and dysarthria, none of these scales directly measures cognitive function and none attempts to assess quality of life after the stroke.

Why have these been the preferred instruments for measurement of outcome in the thrombolytic stroke trials to date? One reason is that functional outcome and neuro-

logic deficit scores are easy to teach and are objectively reproducible.⁴⁻⁶ Another is that disease-specific quality-of-life instruments have only recently begun to be developed for stroke.

Current research in the field of stroke trial methodology reflects these concerns.⁷⁻¹⁰ One recent study reported that a stroke-specific quality-of-life measure, but not a generic quality-of-life measure correlated with patient-reported quality-of-life assessment.⁷ The same study also reported a strong correlation between the quality-of-life ratings and standard stroke outcome measures including the Barthel Index and the NIHSS. On the other hand, another recent study found wide variability in how patients valued outcomes of stroke and concluded that, within their study population, people were not inclined to accept stroke treatment options involving very high risks.¹⁰

Neurologic and functional outcome measures might correlate significantly more with cognitive and quality-of-life outcome measures in the case of stroke than in the case of disorders that spare cognitive function such as spinal cord injury and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Nonetheless, Dr. Green’s comments underline the fact that more research is needed in the area of thrombolytic therapy in stroke, not only for the purpose of determining who benefits and by how much, but also to determine how we should measure that benefit.

Peter C. Wyer, MD

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